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Notes

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MODE OR MOOD?

In itself the question whether we should use mood or mode is trivial; for mature scholars it makes no difference, and nobody cares which form another scholar employs. But for young people the case is not quite the same. To them it may well be a little confusing to hear one teacher use one form and another another. If such differences put the slightest barrier in the way of learning two difficult languages, then it would be a gain to come eventually to an agreement on one or the other. There is here, I think, a bit of avoidable friction and loss. That is why I should like to see teachers and school books come to an agreement. Is there any ground for preference between the forms?

The majority use mood—all the Latin grammars, Goodwin in his *Grammar* and in his *Moods and Tenses*, and Gildersleeve in all his work on syntax. Perhaps this ought to settle it. For me this would settle it, whatever my previous practice, but for the one little fact, that pure reason is on the other side. Historically the word is Latin *modus*, German *Modus*, French and English “mode.” The form mood was a blunder, due to confusion with the other word mood, German *Muth*, etc. Some half-learned scholar fancied the word should be mood, because *modus* of the verb indicated the mood or state of mind of the speaker. The notion was attractive. Dr. Johnson, though he correctly distinguished the two etymologies, adopted it in so far that his dictionary never allowed our meaning to the spelling, “mode.” So the false notion was strengthened and perpetuated, as were so many other blunders that got imbedded in the same “authority.” Plausible error has wonderful power of self-propagation.

But many never accepted the blunder, Latin *modus* being always at hand, so long as all grammars were in Latin, to suggest the correct form. In this country it happened that the Yale tradition has been nearly uniform. Woolsey, Hadley, Whitney, and among Latinists Morris, have adhered to mode. The present writer in using mode has merely followed his teachers. The Hadley-Allen *Grammar* and Babbitt’s revision of it have retained mode. So a respectable minority have been on the side that is etymologically better.

But that need make no difference, and would make no difference with me, if we could hope for agreement on mood. Why can we not? Because

the power of reason, though very quiet, is a subtle and persistent force that never gets quite choked out. The unsophisticated mind dislikes error, even in small matters. The discrepancy between mood and the adjective modal is one of those useless little anomalies that people instinctively desire to get rid of. And as each older generation settles down to comfortable acceptance, a new generation comes on, takes a fresh look, and raises the disconcerting question, Why? Why not straighten this out? So there will always be a silent, steady force working for mode, and keeping that form alive. With reason on one side and nothing but inertia on the other, the latter may easily maintain its position for generation, but it can never completely win.

Several illustrations of what I mean lie near at hand. Two will suffice. Twenty-five years ago nearly all teachers of Greek in this country pronounced *αι* like *ai*. Some younger members of the Harvard faculty had adopted a pronunciation more nearly in accord with Athenian usage of the best period, believing that this would be on the whole better for students. The production of the *Oedipus* at Harvard in 1881 had made this minor reform widely known; a few schoolmasters had adopted it. But one might fairly doubt whether it could prevail, the overwhelming majority of teachers being against it. But reason slowly worked for it. Older men mostly did not change; but the newcomers generally followed reason when they were free to do so. No one doubts now that the more correct pronunciation is established in this country, and it is a part of the reformed pronunciation of Greek which is rapidly gaining ground in England.

Again in metric, the terms *arsis* and *thesis* got badly mixed in late Roman times. Modern usage reversed the original meaning of the words, until Westphal insisted on applying them correctly. Even his friend and partner in the study of metric never went with him in this; Rossbach's last volume, published in 1889, stuck to the erroneous tradition. A few school books still do the same, but it is clear that the tradition is practically defeated. Is there any writer on metric under fifty who does not follow the Greek usage?

In these cases and in plenty of others we may see that as a rule final agreement can be had only on the side of reason. In the present condition of classical studies we cannot afford to carry the slightest needless weight; we ought to have as few disagreements of this kind as possible, for the sake of our pupils. And in small matters as well as large Plato's principle is still sound: *ἐπιστήμη γὰρ οἶμαι δεῖ κρίνεσθαι ἀλλ' οὐ πλῆθει τὸ μέλλον καλῶς κριθήσεσθαι*. To be decided right, a thing must be decided in accordance with knowledge rather than by numbers.

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